

INTERVIEW with Sarah Pritchard

The Changing Face of Academic Presses

by Richard Poynder

SUBSCRIBE NOW!



Vol. 27 No. 6 — June 2010

These are tough times for university presses. In the wake of the global financial crisis, many of them are struggling to survive. The presses at both **Louisiana State University** and **Utah State University** faced possible closure last year. Meanwhile, Eastern Washington University Press **succumbed** to mounting financial pressures and will close up shop this month.

To get a closer view of the challenges confronting university presses, Sarah Pritchard, who is the Charles Deering McCormick University librarian at Northwestern University, offered some insight.

In addition to being university librarian, Pritchard is the dean of Northwestern University Press (**NUP**). When NUP's former director moved on last year, the provost launched an internal review, and Pritchard gave serious thought to the role of the university press in the 21st century.

Founded in 1893, NUP does \$1.5 million in net sales today, has 15 staff members, and publishes about 60 new books a year in theater studies, literature, philosophy, and other areas of the humanities. As the internal review was in the works, it quickly became apparent that a humanities press the size of NUP cannot realistically expect to make money. In fact, the university has to subsidize it, according to Pritchard.

Clearly, one outcome of the review could have been closing the press. But it has the support of faculty at Northwestern, who concluded that NUP should be maintained. However, it was recommended that the link between the press and the scholarly mission of the university be more explicit.

"Everything that happens on campus is intended to advance the mission of the whole university," says Pritchard. "That is the purpose of the library, and it is the purpose of any academic part of the campus. So we argued that the press needed to be better embedded into the wider university mission."

The aim is to "demonstrate the value the university receives for the subsidy it provides," she says. Clearly, making that link is all the more important in times of financial stringency, and it is especially important as presses begin the daunting task of transitioning from print-based to electronic-based publishing environments.

For Pritchard, overseeing this transition is the next logical step in her career. She began as the first reference specialist in women's studies at the **Library of Congress**, subsequently became director of libraries at **Smith College**, and then became university librarian at the University of California–Santa Barbara (**UCSB**). While she had formal responsibility for publishing programs as associate executive director at the Association of Research Libraries (**ARL**), the change to direct oversight of a scholarly press was a new venture for her when she arrived at Northwestern in 2006.

"It was one of the things that appealed to me about the position," she says, "a chance to expand my horizons as a library director and to explore new publishing projects at a time of great innovation."

With the recent appointment of Jane Bunker, formerly of SUNY Press, as director, Pritchard can at least look forward to delegating the day-to-day responsibilities for the press to someone else again. The following interview has been edited for style and length.

Q: How would you characterize NUP?

A: NUP is a midsize university press equivalent, I would say, to **Temple University Press**. We specialize in theater, literature, philosophy, and other areas of the humanities. We currently do about \$1.5 million in net sales, have about 15 staff and publish about 60 new books a year. This includes original monographs, foreign translations, and reprints.

We also have a quite extensive and active backlist, serve as a distributor for a handful of smaller presses, and support two scholarly periodicals.

Q: Have there been changes in academic publishing that caused you to do some soul searching in recent years?

A: An intensive review process began last year for a director, when our previous press director **Donna Shear** left for a bigger university press. Around the same time, we experienced the terrible financial crisis of **2008–2009**. This had a particularly powerful impact on university publishing, and indeed on all publishing, because there was a spill-over effect from the decline of the retail economy as well as reductions in academic library budgets.

Q: Can you say something about the deliberative process you went through?

A: It was an internal review addressed to the Provost Daniel Linzer and lasted 6 to 8 months. The provost wanted to explore the press's situation in detail before we focused on hiring a director. The aim was to have a clear consensus on the strategies the press should be pursuing and on the kind of director we were looking for.

So we set out to study the press so far as its management, operations, and editorial strategy were concerned, then to look at the larger environment of university publishing, asking questions such as: What should we be thinking about? Where should we be going? Should we be completely restructuring the press?

Q: What did you discover?

A: We discovered a number of very positive things. We learned, for instance, that there is strong faculty support for the press, particularly in terms of ensuring that its scholarly mission stays intact. Of course, the question was how to do that.

We also quickly saw that it is very difficult for a small press to be only one thing, because you have few opportunities for cross subsidization, particularly if you only do a humanities monograph front list like us, and especially if you do continental philosophy and European literature. We had to conclude that while these are extremely important niches, they won't ever generate large sales.

For this reason, it has been one of the strategies of the press in recent years to enhance its revenues by doing selected other things. So we do a little bit of trade publishing. As I said, we provide a number of services to other presses.

Doing distribution agreements with other presses, for instance, allows us to charge some modest fees. We also sometimes buy the rights for the paperback edition of books where the hardback has been released by another publisher.

Q: You also sell novels, don't you?

A: Some, but it is our trade books that are key—books that sell well in Chicago, for example. We have a Frank Lloyd Wright guide book that is a nice seller. One of the main questions the review committee asked was whether the press should continue to pursue these other lines of business.

Q: What recommendations did the committee eventually make?

A: We recommended that the press should seek to maintain its existing strengths, but that it should be embedded in a more active way in the university. While it was already quite closely linked to the academic mission of the university, we suggested that more work needed to be done in that area. And we tried to demonstrate the benefit—or linkages—of the press to the larger mission of the university. We also suggested that more work needed to be done in tweaking the business model.

Q: What about these linkages?

A: Right now, a lot of universities are articulating a set of linkages between their presses and host institutions. This is set within the rhetoric of defining a mission that is focused on disseminating scholarship, and then seeking to coordinate all the activities that take place across the university that engage in scholarly dissemination. So the review looked holistically at ways in which the existing work of the press could be embedded into the larger process.

The logic here is that everything that happens on campus is intended to advance the mission of the entire university. That is the purpose of the library, and it is the purpose of any academic part of the campus. So we argued that the press needed to be better embedded into the wider university mission, asking itself the question: How do we use the press to advance the mission of the university?

Then, in a forward-looking sense, we suggested that the press ought to be constantly looking at new ways of strengthening that linkage. That it seek to leverage its core scholarly publishing strengths, while continuing in a modest way with some of the additional business activities but never in a way that would be detrimental to the university's larger scholarly mission.

Q: Was a possible outcome of the review a recommendation that the press be closed?

A: I suppose so, although that possibility was never put to the review committee as a priority. However, it was always in the back of our minds that the justification for the press needed to be clearly articulated and that we needed to demonstrate a clear link between the academic strengths of the press and the academic mission of the university. We also knew we had to provide evidence that there was a reasonable business model.

After all, if we couldn't do that then, what was the point of having a press, particularly given that with humanities publishing (in fact, most sorts of monographic publishing), you cannot expect to make much profit.

We did not blatantly say that the press should be closed unless the university came up with a bunch of money, but we did worry that if we didn't embed the press sufficiently in the university mission, then the push-back would be:

"Well, you should just shut it down."

Q: Three months after Northwestern University reaffirmed its commitment to NUP, it announced the acquisition of Curbstone Press. Was this a consequence of the review and its conclusions?

A: The acquisition of Curbstone was just wonderful timing for us but not something planned. We were approached right in the middle of the review, and it was clear that Curbstone was a great fit. For example, Curbstone publishes a lot of Slavic literature as does NUP. Since our reaffirmation of the press was based on maintaining our scholarly strengths acquiring Curbstone made a great deal of sense.

By the way, Curbstone has a fabulous backlist. This was important because with many presses typically two-thirds, or even more, of sales will come from your backlist. So to acquire a beautiful backlist that had a very good fit with ours was very much in keeping with our aim of maintaining our existing strengths.

Q: Is there an inescapable logic to university presses getting larger?

A: I have heard people say that it is difficult to be in the middle, as we are. They argue that you need either to be very large or very small. What became evident to us during the review is that you need a certain critical mass of staff in a university press, although one can argue about exactly what that mass is or what specialties it should include. So as part of our discussions, we considered what we should outsource. We were already outsourcing warehousing, printing, and a fair amount of copy editing, although not all of it. We also sometimes outsource our design work. Likewise, we use outside sales reps, although we have always retained a core group of editorial sales and production people.

During this process, we tried to establish what our core functions are. In doing so, we realized that you can't randomly adjust your publishing size, because there is a certain workload that requires a certain number of people to fulfill. We also realized that if you are a midsized publisher, the need to leverage that core staff can be difficult, and you can't just endlessly divide your people if you want to slightly reduce your output.

It also became clear that if we started cutting back, we could get into a sort of downward spiral. For instance, we could stop publishing trade books, but we might then find there was no reason for trade reps to market our other books because bookstores are not going to sell as much in Hegelian philosophy as they are in the illustrated Harold Washington book, for example.

So we concluded that if you start cutting back too much, you find you have suddenly devolved to the point where you are issuing a very small number of very scholarly materials.

On the plus side, since NUP reports to the director of the library, some of its IT needs, and other overheads, can be provided by the library.

Q: The issues would be different for a large press?

A: Yes, one benefit of being very large is that you are usually have multiple lines of business that can cross-subsidize each other.

Q: This would be by journal publishing?

A: Exactly. The great business driver of many presses is having a healthy portfolio of quarterly journals. Libraries pay for them in advance, and the money comes in all year. And if it is scientific journals—and I hate to say this because I also speak as a librarian and so I have to buy these things—you can charge higher prices.

Q: Would I be right in thinking that NUP does not make a profit?

A: The press does not make money. In fact, the university spends money on it. Some people may view that as red ink, but I prefer to think of it as an investment: The university invests in scholarly publishing much in the way that it invests in the library when it buys millions of dollars' worth of books from other publishers.

Q: While no one expects the library to make a profit, should university presses be more focused on fulfilling the scholarly mission than making money?

A: Yes. With both the library and the press, we are investing in the dissemination of scholarly information. We do it by creating information, we do it by publishing information, and we do it by having a library. The university is in the business of scholarly research and information, and the press is one of the mechanisms we use to fulfill that larger mission.

Q: How much does Northwestern invest in NUP each year?

A: We don't really share budget figures for the university. As I said, NUP does require a subsidy to operate, but the question comes down to how you can justify to the university a sum of money that it calls a subsidy but that I call an investment. It costs money to run the French department, and it costs more money to run the university library. The issue is to what degree the university benefits when it invests money in the press.

Q: How would you characterize NUP's business model?

A: One of first challenges for the new director will be to look at how we currently do things and to ask whether it is the best way to do them. If not, the question becomes one of how we change tack.

Q: One of the biggest question facing university presses today is when and how to sell digital products. You don't currently sell ebooks?

A: No, but we very much want to. That would be a key strategy. But it is hard for a small press to front some of the new models right now. There is a critical mass problem.

Q: How so?

A: The first issue with ebooks is that we simply don't have enough books to justify providing the entire ebook functionality ourselves. So we are looking at what jobber services are available in the ebook market that can help us. However, once you start looking into this, you see that from a cost point of view that these services are often prohibitive for small presses.

Right now, it is like the early days of computers when you could only have one type of database search software on one CD-ROM on one machine. And you were further constrained by the fact that the operating system was different on every machine. That did not change until the advent of what used to be called the thin client.

Q: And then there was the web browser?

A: Exactly. I date from before the advent of the first web browser so I remember what a watershed that was. The browser really opened things up because it meant that libraries could negotiate with publishers for a variety of databases and be able to access them all through one delivery platform, instead of literally having to point people to a certain piece of hardware for each database.

Today, we face the same hardware problem with ebooks, although we are beginning to see people bringing hardware to market that can download multiple different ebook formats and software that can be put on a variety of different kinds of hardware. I have just started reading about the new software called Blio, for instance.

What is needed is more platform independent hardware. We don't want to have to sell only one type of ebook to only one type of customer. We want the content and the hardware to be independent, so that one digital file that can be disseminated in a variety of ways.

Q: Do you plan on selling NUP's books in a print on demand (POD) model?

A: There are two different kinds of print on demand, of course. We have been using print on demand in the back room for years.

Q: Was it a form of just-in-time printing?

A: Yes. We have the option of doing print on demand if we need to do a quick restocking, for instance. When a book is new, we will do a big print run upfront, but we don't maintain, or we are trying not to maintain, large passive stocks of preprinted books.

The challenge with the back-room approach is that it doesn't pay to print just one or two copies. You need to print 100 or more copies. That worked just fine for us last fall when one of our books suddenly turned out to be a Nobel Prize-awarded book. It was simply a case of, "Whoops, quick, get the inventory up." But print on demand doesn't work for small print runs.

Q: When people talk about print on demand today, are they talking about readers having a book printed for them at the point of sale?

A: Right. What is much more exciting right now is the complementary emergence of the user-driven print on demand, such as the Espresso Book Machine model. It's great, but you don't get the same quality or at least not yet.

Q: While one inevitable consequence of going digital is that you have to start thinking about open access (OA), does NUP plan to make any of its books OA?

A: I see a lot of advantages to the selective use of OA in both monographs and journals. However, the question you immediately face is how you get over the hump. For a small press, your backlist is your ongoing bread and butter. So you aim to have at least one big seller on your backlist, probably a textbook. NUP has a couple of big selling textbooks in the field of improvisation and the teaching of drama in classes, for example. These have become staple texts in theater and performance programs.

The problem is that if your backlist is quite profitable and you make it OA, which some people advocate, how do you make up the lost revenue? Or do you just slash your staff?

The truth is that you can't produce books from nothing, even if you are printing them electronically. You still have design, marketing, programming, editorial work, copy editing, and so on. So OA raises a difficult problem for university presses.

Q: The model that many advocate for OA books is making the text freely available online but sell the print version, so that etext will drive print sales. Do you see it as a viable model for NUP?

A: Absolutely, I see that as a very logical model, and I would envisage us moving to that model before we move to a totally OA environment. By the way, we are currently in the process of moving one of our journals to OA, which we are very excited about ... *TriQuarterly*.

Q: *TriQuarterly* was also handed over to students in the university's graduate creative-writing program to manage, which turned out to be a controversial decision, didn't it?

A: That's true because *TriQuarterly* has a loyal following. There were also some internal factors that made it locally a little bit contentious. It's not quite the case that it is being simply "turned over" to students. However, in terms of the academic mission, having it situated in the midst of the writing faculty is the ideal thing to do, and I expect it to usher in a very exciting new era that will allow much wider dissemination of the journal.

And I am happy to report that Shenandoah Review recently announced the identical move of going all electronic and affiliating the magazine more closely with writing programs on campus.

Q: What will be the business model for *TriQuarterly* as an OA journal?

A: While it will still be a Northwestern University journal, *TriQuarterly* will not be part of the press any more. Since it won't be under my purview, it is difficult for me to speak about the details.

Q: Is it true there won't be any subscription revenues?

A: There will not be any subscriptions, but it will operate on a very different staffing model. The editorial board will be composed of faculty poets and fiction writers, for instance, who are all based at Northwestern.

Q: As faculty members, will they also receive a salary for this work?

A: They are also published luminary writers so they are ideally qualified for the editorial board. Meanwhile, much of the logistics of correspondence, reading of manuscripts, copy editing, getting things into a web format, and so one will be done by graduate students in the creative writing program.

I should stress that it is not going to be a journal for student work, which was widely and inaccurately reported on some blogs, and the students are not the editors. In fact, it will utilize a very similar model to the one used by most prestigious law review journals.

Q: Did the controversy also involve internal factors you just referred to and that the editor and assistant editor of *TriQuarterly* were not told what was happening until hours before Northwestern published a press release about these changes?

A: The editor and the assistant editor were notified of the intention to transition the journal extremely early on about 9 months before the change would occur. That is about the longest lead time I can imagine anyone expecting to get.

Q: But I think their understanding was that there would still be a print version of the journal and that they would therefore retain their jobs?

A: It's true that that wasn't the case. But as I say, they were given very lengthy notice, and the managing editor Ian Morris has been helping in the transition.

It is also true that a very different model will be used to produce the electronic version, but so far as the editors are concerned, it was hardly what I would call a firing at all but a transition.

It is difficult in any organization when you change the staffing pattern and have a reduction in the work force. But out of the changes will come two important benefits. First, *TriQuarterly* will be affiliated with a top creative writing faculty, and so much better aligned with the university's mission. Second, it will be OA, which will be very appealing to readers and authors, especially younger authors who want to do more venturesome kinds of creative writing.

Q: As you have indicated, the current financial environment for university presses is very challenging, and some have been hard hit as a result, including those at Louisiana State and Utah State. Utah's response was interesting: It embraced OA and merged the press with the library. NUP also reports to the library. Have the two departments been merged?

A: The reporting line has shifted, which is something that happened before I arrived in 2006. But they have not been merged and remain two departments. The press reports to me as the university librarian, not to "the library." I am the dean who oversees both.

Q: We seem to be witnessing an increasingly close relationship that is developing between university presses and their institutional libraries, such as in Utah as well as Michigan, Tennessee, and California. What is driving this trend, and is it connected with the development of institutional repositories, which look set to become an important distribution channel for scholarly research?

A: The trend to having the press report to the dean of libraries, or in some cases, actually merging it organizationally (that is less common than simply the reporting relationship) actually predates, and is not too much related to the development of institutional repositories, though obviously there are quite interesting potential mutual benefits.

I think this organizational trend relates more to perceived commonalities at the administrative level as to the types of expertise needed; a linkage more common at universities with small or medium-sized presses. This suggests that the issue may well be more related to finding the right kind of oversight for the "little" press, rather than having it report to the provost at a time when provosts are increasingly spread thin with a proliferation of major duties.

In the cases with which I am familiar, the press was in need of a good organizational home for budgetary and oversight reasons; the change in reporting line has only rarely been something proactively sought for its strategic opportunities.

That said, I do think more and more universities are seeing the strategic advantages of linking the two as digital information services converge, and universities are desperately seeking both savings and innovations.

Q: What are the strategic advantages?

A: I see benefits in a number of separate areas. First, administrative overhead is saved—financial management, personnel administration, publisher/vendor relations, and desktop IT support, for example.

Second, high-level digital technology initiatives are mutually complementary—as you note, repositories but also just the development of digital collections, digital preservation, complex multimedia websites, streaming audio/video (the latter two examples both can now be components of scholarly publishing).

Third, categories of professional expertise are very complementary. For example, experienced library bibliographers and experienced acquisitions editors are looking at very similar issues from only slightly different sides of the coin: What are scholarly authors writing and what do other scholars want to buy/read, what directions are the disciplines going, and so forth.

Q: And the downsides?

A: The wild unpredictability in the retail book market creates enormous strain within the confines of a typical library budget planning process; the press financial arrangements are in fact quite different (e.g., long advances, failed contracts, returns, revolving funds, stock depreciation, are not as common in library budgets); and there are genuine market pressures, competition, timing/deadlines, that make the running of a press much more like any real business, leaving the press staff feeling as if they really are quite a different kettle of fish.

However, these downsides can be overcome, and I think that in the long run and given the broad scope of universities, linking the library and the press and some other units is valuable in coordinating—and affirming—the universities' fundamental role in the dissemination and preservation of scholarly information. The presses should be seen in this light and not as revenue-producing side activities.

Q: Sandy Thatcher, a former president of the Association of American University Presses and director of Penn State University Press, writes frequently about scholarly publishing. He has pointed out that university presses developed in response to the failure of commercial publishers to meet the needs of the scholarly community. Could we argue that commercial publishers are now meeting those needs and that university presses have become supernumerary?

A: Commercial publishers are still not meeting the needs of the research community in many subject areas. True, electronic publishing has made commercial niche publishing easier, and we are seeing a proliferation of small independent presses entering the academic publishing market. But one could not argue that they are meeting all the needs of the research community so far as scholarly dissemination is concerned.

Q: You pointed out that the smaller university presses face constant financial pressure and indicated that OA can only be expected to increase this pressure. At a SPARC-ARL forum earlier this year, Maria Bonn, the associate university librarian for publishing at the University of Michigan, said that while it was unclear whether Michigan various OA efforts would be viable over the long term, "[W]e think it's the right thing to do. It's the purpose of the press to support scholarly access." This implies to me that university presses face an inevitable tension between viability and the need to support the scholarly mission. Do you agree?

A: That is a good question. Of course I am not sure that my boss would want to hear it expressed in that way, but the difference between, as you put it, viability and the scholarly mission is in some ways a question about whether

you talk about losses or cash subsidies. Most small university presses are subsidised by their university. Likewise, most large university presses subsidize their humanities monographs internally because they have a journals portfolio or a textbook arm.

As I said earlier, this means that presses are under pressure to demonstrate the value the university receives for the subsidy it provides. It is also important to show that in running the press you are nevertheless paying good attention to proper business practices. You don't want to just throw money down the drain by having a sloppily run press, and excuse it by saying: "Well, it costs money to publish monographs."

What you need is a finely tuned, well-oiled, up-to-date, modern press constantly looking at new dissemination channels, balancing its books, and always ensuring that it fits the university mission. If you can say you are doing all of those things right, and yet you still require some subsidy to break even, then you can justify what you are doing.

Q: What university presses such as NUP will never support themselves, they play a vital role in communicating research, particularly in those disciplines (such as the humanities) unlikely to generate sufficient profit to attract commercial publishers. So is the challenge they face that of having constantly to persuade their host institution and faculty that they provide a sufficient contribution to the scholarly mission to warrant subsidizing?

A: And it is sometimes difficult to make that argument in any given university because you don't generally publish your own faculty's work. You don't do that because you don't want to be labeled a vanity press. This means that some administrators are inclined to ask, "So why do we have a press?"

The fact is that the real value of university presses lies in their collective aggregation, the collective value they provide to scholarship in the humanities. And I stress humanities because that is where the need is greatest.

Q: This goes to a point Sandy Thatcher made on the Liblicence mailing list earlier this year. Responding to news that Cornell University is asking other universities to contribute money to help support the physics preprint server arXiv, Thatcher cited The Report of the National Enquiry into Scholarly Communication of 1979. The report's eighth recommendation, he said, reads: "To broaden support for scholarly publishing, we recommend that universities without presses become active participants in the publishing process as sponsors of work produced on their campuses." Comments?

A: I would completely agree with everything Sandy said. It is exactly what I was referring to earlier: We need an umbrella way of looking at all the different mechanisms that we can use to ensure the dissemination of scholarly information.

So far as arXiv is concerned, I am not at all surprised at developments. We have been holding arXiv up as the great model for OA and discipline-driven repositories, but guess what? It costs money to run big server farms. The air-conditioning alone is enormously expensive. Then you have to maintain programmers. True, arXiv might not need editors, but you still need expertise to manage these enormous bodies of information.

For instance, there is a lot of after-the-fact-peer review embedding to do. People love arXiv, but it takes a financial commitment to run it.

Q: Can you see a scheme similar to the one launched for arXiv being introduced to help support smaller university presses such as NUP?

A: I don't think we need an approach like that in the humanities. What we want is to enable the publishing to happen by better supporting the scholarship process.

Q: How?

A: What I see is more in the way of a general decentralized commitment and acknowledgement of the needs of scholarly dissemination by means of subventions within universities. These kinds of subventions should be driven by the research side of a university and on a faculty basis. And supporting humanities faculties is essential.

The fact is that we provide vast labs for the scientists, and they get big grants to cover page charges when publishing. Humanities research doesn't have the same sort of national granting structure, and we don't have to provide labs for them, other than the library, which is an enormously expensive laboratory in itself. So we need to look at a way of providing research funds for humanists.

One possibility may lie in the OA funds we can see being created. There is quite a lot of discussion about this right now, and the University of Wisconsin and Berkeley are two leaders in this development. There is also a new publication from SPARC about OA funds, and I plan to take that publication to my vice president for research and start a conversation.

Q: As the name implies, these OA (or Gold OA) funds are being created to help researchers pay the article processing charge levied by OA journal publishers, so you see a larger role for them?

A: Yes, they are being called OA funds, but you could equally call them subvention funds. The dean of the graduate school at Northwestern tells me that he gets telephone calls all the time from faculty saying that they need money for a subvention to get their book published at some other press.

Therefore, the model I see is one in which you have a pool of money that can be considered research funds. These funds might be used for page charges in a commercial subscription journal, they might be used as a subvention for a university press, or they might be used to pay OA charges. All three of those things are basically undergirding the same process: getting the material out there.

Right now, we have a great deal of unevenness as to how research is supported at the national level. That is part of the problem the presses face. We don't get books from faculty who already have big grants for instance. So what we need is some form of platform-neutral approach to supporting the research of individual faculty.

Q: How do you see NUP developing over the next few years?

A: I see the press moving more actively to develop an aggregated electronic platform. This may enable us to cut out the middle man in some areas of marketing. I also think that once we can deliver things electronically we can attract a bigger overseas market.

At the same time, I see us sticking to and enhancing our core strengths in certain disciplines. After all, there aren't that many people out there doing phenomenology or publishing literature from the former Republic of Yugoslavia, and yet, there is some incredible work being produced that deserves to be published.

I also see NUP entering into more partnerships with other presses. For instance, we recently partnered with several presses in a project underwritten with grants from the Mellon Foundation. One of those grants involves three presses working together to look at the "first book problem" faced by junior faculty. The Mellon grant will allow us to provide subventions and other kinds of support within our niche of Slavic studies.

The other grant is for work that will be done exclusively at NUP, but the press is partnering very actively with faculty in African studies on the one hand, and with theater and performance studies on the other.

Q: Is that a good example of embedding the press in the university's scholarly mission?

A: Absolutely. Again, we won't just be publishing our own faculty's work, but our faculty will be overseeing an environment in which scholarship will be created.

For instance, in the area of African studies, we will be producing a journal called *Islamic Africa*. This will allow us to use the expertise of Northwestern's faculty to facilitate new scholarship. The faculty in the program of African studies will form the editorial board, and with the help of the grant, they will foster visiting scholars from Africa, organize seminars with them, and make sure that they have venues for publishing.

Q: You see a positive future for NUP then?

A: Yes, I see a positive future for NUP. The university has reaffirmed its commitment to the press, and this has generated a certain excitement about where we can do more. However, the bottom line is that as a small university press, you are always very close to the edge. There is no fat in the publishing world and what happened during 2008–2009 was really very unfortunate because to have this enormous downturn in a marketplace where there is no fat, and then to see the presses blamed as if it were somehow their fault for being badly managed or old-fashioned, is somewhat short-sighted. It is an exciting time to be in publishing but also a scary one.

An abridged version of this interview appears in the June issue of IT.

Richard Poynder, a freelance journalist based in the U.K., writes about information technology, telecommunications, and intellectual property with a special emphasis on online services and open access issues.

Send your comments about this article to itletters@infotoday.com.
